DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 038 403 TE 001 782

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TITLE	Research Strategies for Evaluating the Strengths and Limitations of English Methods Textbooks.
INSTITUTION	New York State English Council, Oswego.
PUB DATE	Dec 69
NOTE	9p.
JOURNAL CIT	English Record; v20 n2 p75-81 Dec 1969
EDRS PRICE	EDRS Price MF-$0.25 HC-$0.55
DESCRIPTORS	English Education, *English Instruction, Evaluation Criteria, Evaluation Methods, *Evaluation Techniques, *Methods Courses, Research Methodology, Teacher Education, Textbook Content, *Textbook Evaluation, Textbooks, Textbook Standards

ABSTRACT

Guidelines for judging English methods-course textbooks need to be developed and applied to the increasing quantities of texts being published. Objective data for evaluation may be obtained through several approaches: (1) key word in context, in which the frequency of a word is accepted as representative of the importance of a concept; (2) analogue, in which texts are checked for the presence or absence of key concepts; and (3) paradigm, in which a researcher projects an ideal methods text as a bench mark against which others may be compared. Another system providing a rough instrument for judging the strengths and limitations of textbooks is the Hare system. Using this letter system, a list of 31 books published between 1958 and 1968 was sent to 100 college English methods instructors who were asked to rank the books from 1 (highest) to 4. Sixty-one instructors responded. The results of this survey correlated well with earlier data obtained through the use of the other three evaluation systems, showing that Hook's text is best for a general overview of English teaching; Loban, Ryan, and Squire for in-service teachers; Bernstein for highest student interest; Guth for scholarship; and Burton and Simmons for application. (JM)

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ED038403

RESEARCH STRATEGIES FOR EVALUATING THE STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF ENGLISH METHODS TEXTBOOKS

Edward R. Fagan

Introduction

Judging the strengths and limitations of textbooks used in English methods courses is a task which is best approached with the caution implied in the title of one of Kierkegaard's books, namely with "Fear and Trembling, the Sickness Unto Death." This caution is justified by the dearth of objective criteria for making judgments about methods texts and by the sentient recognition of the trap baited with judgmental concepts such as *strengths* and *limitations*. But the burgeoning publication of methods texts requires that some evaluative criteria be developed, and the old saw, "Let George do it" requires that somebody be "George," even if George turns out to be Charlie Brown. With such tacit martyrdom in mind, *strengths* are defined for this study as those criteria which have a measurable impact on the methods used to teach English in contemporary English classrooms. *Measurable* in this context means evidence of students' increased academic awareness and/or behavioral change. *Limitations* are defined as those incomplete recommendations or outright gaps within methods textbooks which have a high probability of distorting the prospective English teacher's perceptions of his professional duties within his discipline.

These arbitrary and judgmental definitions, if accepted, permit this generalization: no single textbook in any given methods course is sufficient to provide prospectve English teachers with the contexts they need to guide students' apprehension of English as English is defined in the research literature extant at this time.[1] Notice the time factor in the generalization. It is possible that some linotype system is even now printing out a refutation of the generalization, but for methods textbooks published up to and including January 1968 the generalization holds. English methods course instructors are well aware of this generalization, but it needs to be stated for some of our colleagues in other disciplines and for all critics of English methods courses,

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this latter group exacting the stance that there is no content to methods and/or that methods deal with common sense, defined as "the stuff that everyone knows." That the contents of textbooks used to teach English methods have grown exponentially in both affective and cognitive domains is well documented by the mass of data stored in computers at English and/or Educational Resources Information Centers (ERIC) throughout the country.[2] One consequence of the ERIC phenomena is that contrary to critics' statements that methods texts are the stuff "everyone knows," just the opposite is the case; multiple methods texts are necessary to provide even a modicum of what is known about teaching English in today's high schools. Most English methods instructors who use textbooks are well aware of this fact, for of the 61 colleges and universities reporting undergraduate English methods course in their programs,[3] none used a single text, and all used additional materials to supplement the multiple texts used. Variety in the selection of methods textbooks was another characteristic of the 61 colleges and universities responding to the questionnaire and such diversity implies that the strengths and limitations of textbooks used to teach methods are determined by each instructor. Yet such solecism can be strengthened by objective criteria even though such criteria lack the empirical rigor of the logical positivists. What follows is a description of techniques to develop more objectve guidelines for the selection of textbooks used to teach English methods.

Procedures

Criteria used to judge the strengths and limitations of textbooks commonly used in English methods courses can be derived from systematic evaluations of the English teacher's professional duties. These duties are described, albeit inferentially, in bibliographical references such as the "English," "Literature" and "Teacher Education" sections of the *Encyclopedia of Educational Research;* Volumes II, III, and V of the National Council's *Language* Arts series; in references as recent as the October 1967 edition of *PMLA* [4] and in similar reports. Asking the question: "What textbook contents are necessary to teach English according to these sources?" generates answers which might be regarded as criteria which every English teacher "should know." But such criteria would be inefficient, paradoxical and overgeneralized—would, in fact, duplicate the system used by Charters and Waples in their monumental teacher train-

ing study.[5] To systematize the winnowing process, the survey was limited to post 1958, using as a rationale the fact that major curricular reorganizations were initiated at that time. But even in the decade 1958-1968 the wealth of new material to be searched would be unmanageable unless the system were modified still further. Such modification might be accomplished by using a system known as key word in context technique.[6] Such a system popularized by humanists who use the computer for literary analysis, requires that the frequency of a word in context be accepted as one clue to the importance of that word as an identifier of a value-loaded concept for the context involved. In English, for example, notice the *frequency* and the *context* of key words such as: "language," "literature" and "composition" since 1958. That this system has validity can be documented by the fact that key themes in *Hamlet* were identified by its use. The point, however, is that this system was used, along with others, to identify the strengths and weakness of textbook used in teaching English methods courses.

One of these other systems might be called the analogue system, where the analogue search operates upon the principle that it is reasonable to adapt compatible systems from other domains to the analysis of textbooks used in English methods courses. Specifically, Lynch and Evans performed a monumental study of textbooks used to teach English in high schools.[7] Their system might be described as new critic in the sense that each textbook was examined according to its potential for achieving the objectives of a good English program. A "good English program," Lynch and Evans imply, is one which displays contents and processes in such a way that students have a high probability of understanding concepts and principles related to literary genres, language and composition. Although Lynch and Evans' arbitrary judgments about the worth of myriad textbook series is based on *a priori* criteria, their system for analysis does have face validity. When, for example, they score the deadly repetition of diagramming, they support their criticisms by overwhelming examples from text after text and series after series until readers are convinced that diagramming is a ritualistic exercise in futility. Other textbook analysts [8] use systems similar to Lynch and Evans, but the point is that such systems provide analogical models for judging the strengths and limitations of textbooks used in English methods courses.

Still another system for textbook evaluation is that cavalierly identified as the paradigm. To assuage the violence done to professional paradigm makers, the adverb, *cavalierly* is used, but the system behind the concept, paradigm, for textbook evaluation uses Max Weber's "ideal-type" [9] paradigm. Weber's paradigm attempted to gauge the religio-economic behavior of the collective, economic man. His construct, the "ideal type," endowed a hypothetical religio-economic man with *ideal* economic attributes. Then this idealized economic paragon served as a benchmark against which man's economic behavior in real economic situations was measured.

Weber's concept might apply equally well to ascertain the strengths and weaknesses of textbooks used in English methods courses. In this case, an ideal methods textbook is projected. Attributes for the contents of this ideal methods textbook are drawn from the two previously described techniques, namely bibliographical and analogical searches of relevant literature. These two techniques would permit a researcher to generate a list of concepts and/or behaviors which, ideally, every prospective English teacher ought to experience. But such a book, if conscientiously executed, would probably have more pages than *Gone With the Wind.* What are some of the alternatives to such an economically unfeasible tome? One alternative is to narrow the scope of the methods books to, say, the recommended tripod: language, literature and composition. And, in fact, many contemporary methods books do just that. Another alternative is to create a series of books or a collection of articles related to various aspects of the language arts and mass media. And other methods textbooks use that alternative. Still another alternative is to identify some specialty within English as a field—the disadvantaged, the elementary language arts program, linguistics and the like—and to publish a detailed explication to the specialty. Examples of these and other alternatives to the monumental tome implied by the "ideal type" paradigm are presently on the market.

Uses of these textbooks and their subsequent ranking according to the Hare system [10] can provide a very rough instrument for judging the strengths and limitations of textbooks used in English methods courses. The Hare system (named after the man who invented it) asks the user to rank in order, $1 - n$, any given list of data, where 1 stands for the highest rank and other numbers correspondingly lower ranks. Numerals used do not

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have to be defined but, for clarity, were defined for this survey as follows: 1. "Most valuable of the methods texts I used"; 2. "Valuable but contains minor ellipses"; 3. "Generally valuable, but needs supplementary materials"; 4. "Minimally valuable, needs massive supplementation." These numerals were to be placed after a list of English methods textbooks which had been published between 1958 and 1968 and which were on recommended book lists distributed by NCTE, MLA, ASCD, CEE and the like; as well as on lists about methods textbooks supplied by publishers, book review editors, and/or authors of research articles. This list of 31 books was then sent to 100 English methods instructors at colleges and universities selected from the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) list. The selection process attempted to include state universities, liberal arts colleges with teacher education programs, teachers colleges, and private and parochial institutions with teacher education programs. Returns from 61 of the 100 colleges contacted revealed the following ranking of methods texts currently extant in the field.

Author/Title	*Number of Colleges Reporting*	*Hare Rating*
Hook, The Tchng. of H.S. Engl.	45	1.87
Loban *et al.* Tchng. Lang. and Lit.	35	1.97
Fowler, Tchng. Lang., Comp., and Lit.	30	2.07
Guth, Engl. Today and Tomorrow	28	2.07
Lewis/Sisk, Tchng. Engl. 7-12	24	2.17
Sauer, Engl. in Sec. School	34	2.41
Wolfe, Creative Ways to Tch Engl.	33	2.55
Burton & Simmons, Tchng. Engl. in Today's High Schools	29	2.41
NCTE, Lang. Arts in Sec. School	27	2.67
Bernstein, Tchng. Engl. in H.S.	35	2.71

All 61 colleges ranked one or more of the 31 textbooks listed and many colleges went on to list additional texts in a category, "other," provided on the ranking sheet. Arbitrarily, a cut-off point of 24 identifications was set as the lower limit for reporting textbook popularity and, implicitly, their virtues. Basis for such a decision was that the universe (100 colleges) was so small that any textbook not ranked by at least one-third of the 100 colleges would be questionable as representative of methods textbook popularity.

Results

Uses of the three search systems described previously (key word in context (KWIK) [11]/bibliographical, analogue, and ideal type) to evaluate the strengths and limitations of English methods textbooks provides data which correlate well with the survey results noted above. Using bibliographical references and KWIK

techniques, for example, generated methods concepts such as: reading, writing, speaking listening, literature, language composition, structure, technique, philosophy, linguistics and the like. These key words serve to identify the parameters for the analogue system of evaluaton whereby texts are checked for the presence or absence of these key concepts in methods textbooks an "ideal type" can be derivd. This ideal type, in turn, can serve as a paradigm against which the contents of any methods textbooks can be measured.

Using the ideal type as a benchmark all of the above textbooks have strengths such as: techniques, philosophies, contents and applications of same for the conduct of English teaching; by the same benchmark all can be faulted for their omission of technology, research, individualized instruction, deep structure analysis, the disadvantaged as these concepts impinge upon the teaching of English. One fault common to all of these textbooks is the inept use of thought questions, that is, questions which stretch students' minds, involve the class as a whole and further the systematic development of concept building. Too often illustrative questions can be answered "yes" or "no" and thereby engage the teacher and student in a one-to-one dialogue to the detriment of the rest of the class. Or the questions are so framed that answers are implicit in their framing. Bernstein's methods textbook is regarded by some students [12] as most valuable for prospective teachers because of its focus on the questioning technique as a fulcrum for heuristic learning.

Conclusions

Each of the ten listed textbooks and the others which comprised the 31 of the total sample has its strengths and limitations, but how strengths and limitations are defined is a function of each instructor. Since all instructors tend to supplement the textbook used with other materials and/or textbooks, one would be foolish to make judgments about a mythical "best" textbook apart from an ideal type. "Best for what purpose?" would be the question with myriad answers. For a general overview of English teaching perhaps Hook, for in-service teachers Loban, Ryan and Squire (but for pre-service teachers Loban *et al.* is overwhelming) for highest student interest Bernstein (but the contents are pretty traditional seemingly based on the New York City English syllabus) for scholarship Guth (but after Guth one wonders whether students would be prepared to work with the disadvantaged) for

application, Burton and Simmons (but necessary "how-to" details are missing from their collection of readings). Supporting details for judgments about these and other methods textbooks are beyond the scope of this report. (Such detail would require a 400 page tome similar to the Lynch and Evans study.) But the research strategies previously suggested, if employed to evaluate the strengths and limitations of current English methods textbooks, would help generate unique and valuable blueprints for the methods textbooks of future.

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FOOTNOTES

1 Cf. "What Is English?" CCC Journal XIII-3 (October 1962), p. 6. Albert R. Kitzhaber, "What Is English," Dialogue (Winter 1967) New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, pp. 1-17.

2 Cf. William J. Scannell (ed.) The National Council of Teachers of English Educational Resources and Information Center: Clearinghouse on the Teaching of English, Annotated List of Recommended Elementary and Secondary Curriculum Guides in English, 1967. Champaign, Illinois, National Council of Teachers of English, 1967.

3 These schools were drawn from the Council of Graduate Schools list as distributed to membership schools in January 1968.

4 "English Teacher Preparation Study;" PMLA LXXXII-5 (October 1967), pp. 3-8.

5 W. W. Charters and Douglas Waples, The Commonwealth Teacher-Training Study, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1929.

6 Sally Yeates Sedelow and Walter A. Sedelow, Jr., "A Preface to Computational Stylistics," The Computer and Literary Style, Kent, Ohio: Kent Studies in English, Number 2, 1968. pp. 1-13.

7 James J. Lynch and Bertrand Evans, High School English Textbooks: A Critical Evaluation, Boston: Atlantic, Little, Brown, 1963.

8 "How Textbooks Are Chosen," The PCTE Bulletin (February 1968), Bethlehem, Pa., Lehigh University, pp. 25-29.

9 Cf. Talcott Parsons, The Structure of Social Action, New York: The Free Press, 1949, p. 601 ff. Max Weber, The Theory of Social and Economic Organization (Trans. A. M. Henderson and Talcott Parsons) New York: Free Press, 1964. A translation of Part I of Max Weber's Wirtschaft and Gesellschaft.

10 Deobold Van Dalen, Understanding Educational Research, New York: McGraw Hill, 1966. p. 320 describes the rank-order scale system which the Hare system exemplifies.

11 Sedelow, op. cit. KWIK is an acronym used to call the computer program for the analysis, key word in context.

12 A survey of 315 methods students at The Pennsylvania State University, 1965-1966 showed that 68 per cent favored the Berstein textbook.